

# Defining the Good Citizen: Online Conceptions of American Members of the Yahoo! Answers Community

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Received: February 3, 2017

Accepted: February 23, 2017

Available online: March 8, 2017

doi:10.11114/ijsss.v5i4.2265

URL: <https://doi.org/10.11114/ijsss.v5i4.2265>

## Abstract

Educators invest serious effort in bringing their students to adopt the notions of the 'good citizen'. Based on the growing impact of informal learning through social media, especially when asking for online help in civic education assignments, previous studies called for investigating the role of online platforms as arenas of informal civic education. This paper takes up this gauntlet, analyzing inputs of American members of the Yahoo! Answers online community in response to students' queries concerning the definition of the 'good citizen'. The results show a passive and conformist concept of the 'good citizen' that corresponds with previous studies' findings about this image in educational programs and among pre-service teachers, contrary to formal statements regarding the goal of civic education. The paper suggests that there is a feedback loop between offline and online platforms concerning the 'good citizen', which calls for the attention of educators and researches.

**Keywords:** citizenship education, good citizen, social media, informal learning, computers and education

## 1. Introduction

The attributes and actions to be taken by the good citizen, and the role of civic education in preparing students to act accordingly are the subject of ongoing interest of policymakers, educators and researchers. Schools have been found to have direct and indirect influence on the formation of civic identity (McDevitt and Kioussis 2007) and many social education teachers see the raising of their students into active citizens as one of their prime assignments (O'Brien & Smith, 2011).

As this identity builds young adults' expectations of society and of themselves as good citizens, it influences their later political behavior and participation patterns (Thorson, 2012). According to Pykett, Saward and Schaefer (2010), the conceptions underlying the notions of the good citizen result from the different frames held by different actors such as members of the political elite, as well as others within the community.

### 1.1 Key Images of the Good Citizen within the American Educational System

Looking at ten programs to advance democratic and civic education in the United States, and at the attitudes of students who participated in some of these programs, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) identified three, not mutually exclusive images that are being taught to American students as 'the kind of citizen we need to support in effective democratic society' (p. 239): the personally responsible, the participatory, and the justice-oriented citizen. According to the first image, good citizens act responsibly in their community in terms of working and paying taxes, obey the law, recycle, give blood, and volunteer to lend a hand when crisis befalls the community. The personal attributes of such a citizen are integrity, honesty, kindness, being hard working and self-reliance, all of which are necessary to 'solve social problems and improve society' (p. 240).

The second image describes a more active citizen, though the required activity is mostly limited to charity. The participatory citizen knows how government agencies operate and what the strategies for accomplishing collective tasks are, and is an active member of community organizations, contributes to efforts to care for those in need, promotes economic development or cleans up the environment. In other words, such a citizen is slightly more involved in society, and extends her/his responsibility from simply donating to a food drive (a sample action mentioned in the programs) to helping to organize a food drive. Only the third image however describes real involvement and activity. The

justice-oriented citizen critically assesses social, political, and economic structures to understand the causes of social issues, seeks out and addresses areas of injustice, and knows about social and democratic movements as well as how to effect systematic change. This kind of citizen is expected to do more than charity; and instead explores and attempts to discover and work to correct the root cause of hunger and poverty.

Looking into these images, one can identify competitive ideas of citizenship: the first two images, the personally responsible and the participatory citizen, are coherent with a republicanism view of prioritizing the affairs of the community or state over self-interest (Heater, 2013), but they lack other elements of the republicanism concept of citizenship, such as taking active role in shaping one's own society through public debate (Miller, 1995). Moreover, interestingly, in studies conducted in recent years, being patriotic – a prevalent characteristic in the republicanism view of citizenship – was rated as being of moderate importance only, and was not very frequently mentioned by high school students (Doppen, Feinberg & Arrowood-Schultheis, 2014; Feinberg & Doppen, 2010), although an earlier study (Conover and Searing 2000) found high prevalence of patriotism (together with being respectful for others).

A change over time in high schools' endorsement of republicanism concepts of citizenship may be due to the fact that the personally responsible and the participatory image are consistent with the neoliberal view of the good citizen as a self-reliant person (Moore, 2015), which goes hand in hand with another neoliberal perception, which states that governments should not intervene in citizens' lives (Jones 2014). This combination of self-reliance and non-intervention increases detachment between the individual and the state, and escalates self and community segregation. On the other hand, looking at the ideology of the Republican Party, which is supported by many Americans, one can see a strange combination of neoliberal and conservative views (Harvey, 2005). One would expect that this combination would increase the prevalence of patriotism among the mentioned features of the good citizen, and its absence raises questions about the strength of neoliberal individualistic self-concentrated values.

The third image, on the other hand, opposes neoliberal concepts and stresses the social contract on which democratic societies are built. Although the first two images mention social responsibility (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004), the sample actions connected to them reveal a passive interpretation, which does not align with the concept of social responsibility according to the third image. The justice-oriented concept of the good citizen prefers a stricter conception of social responsibility, a self-demanding stance, which calls to an 'institutional or individual action to apply the principles of equal rights, capability, and mutual responsibility to all members of society' (Keynan, 2014, p. 183). This image of the good citizen is the least commonly endorsed (Thorson, 2012; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

The conceptions of the good citizen among American school students have been heavily studied, and most studies found a narrow and rather passive perception of what a good citizen should be. In Conover and Searing's (2000) work on urban, rural and suburban students, more than 90% of the participants believed that following laws and paying taxes were the main requirements of citizens; voting in elections, showing patriotism and serving in the military during wartime were mentioned by about 75%, and serving on a jury and donating to charity were stated by 56% and 23%, respectively. In Sherrod's (2003) study, the two dominant responses were obeying the law and helping others (without specifying the meaning of such help or whether these 'others' include members of other/excluded communities). Other notions, though mentioned much less frequently, were voting and being respectful to others, patriotic, productive, informed, and honest. Martin and Chiodo (2007) analyzed written responses of 333 eighth grade students and 362 eleventh grade students in American rural schools to the question 'What does it mean to be a good citizen'. Their findings were similar: The two salient responses, mentioned mainly by eighth graders, were helping others, especially with one's own community, through church projects or Boy Scout/Girl Scout community activities, and the need to obey laws. Apart from these two dominant responses, some of the students mentioned the good citizen as being patriotic, respecting others, honest, kind to others, working hard, staying out of others' business, and serving in the military. A comparison of rural and urban American high school students undertaken by Feinberg and Doppen (2010) show no noticeable differences between the two groups; Interviews with Ohio and Georgia high school students (Doppen et al., 2014) convey a similar description of the good citizen as respectful, law abiding, honest, helpful (serving others, the community or the country), exercising the right to vote, and paying bills and taxes, with the addition of being informed of constitutional rights. By and large, these studies show that American youth going through the educational system during the first two decades of the twenty-first century view the good citizen mainly as a self-reliant, disciplined, and conformist person, whose more socially active qualities, such as offering a helping hand, are limited to her/his local community and to performing this help through the local community's organizations (such as church or boy/girl scouts). Looking at pre-service teachers, Martin (2012) found that most of them, whether they planned to teach elementary or secondary schools, understand the good citizen as obeying the law and helping others. Similarly, O'Brien and Smith (2011) found that pre-service teachers mostly identified good citizenship with being involved in the community and obeying the law. These findings show pre-service teachers' views match the personally responsible and participatory images of the good citizen, to some degree, yet they reflect an even narrower conception of citizenship than that taught in educational programs.

### *1.2 Civic Education and Web 2.0 Tools*

In recent years, alongside studies aiming to assess the conceptions of the good citizen among high school students and pre-service teachers, scholars have begun to look into the implementation of Web 2.0 tools within civic education, as a tool of socialization. O'Brien (2008) sees the Internet as a 'means for individuals and groups to address matters of social concern and, thus, contribute to an online democratic commons' (p. 133). O'Brien goes on to propose the establishment of an Internet site in which high school students could discuss their concerns regarding issues at the school, local, national, or international levels, as part of the socialization process, with the aim of leading them to become good and involved citizens. Richards (2010) encourages teachers to create private online networks, in which their students would participate as part of their civic class discussions, and Hostetler (2012) recommends online discussions to 'extend the classroom, allow students in different classes to interact, and encourage democratic citizenship skills and dispositions through the development of a larger democratic community of learners' (p. 101).

## **2. The Current Study**

As it is now recognized that students' learning is no longer confined to the formal teacher-class format, and that students rely heavily on Q&A online communities as platforms for informal learning (Madden et al., 2013), here attention is directed to the examination of the conceptions of the good citizen as discussed within one Question and Answering (Q&A) online community, which American high school students use to obtain help in their school assignments.

The exchanges between members of these communities are usually the result of one member seeking help concerning issues or problems they face, be that within the realms of business, the family, or school and other members suggest their input on the posted questions (Oh, Oh, & Shah, 2009). Participants in these communities who wish to ask or answer questions are required to register as members, but do not always identify themselves. From looking into those who do, it seems that members come from all sectors of society, young and old, and diverse professions. Various Q&A communities are available, such as Brainly (a Polish based social learning networks in the English language, which operates various platform worldwide for students and educators), or the users' community of Quora, (an American based Q&A site, where questions are answered and edited by other members). The Q&A community chosen for the analysis is the Yahoo! Answers (Y!A) community. We chose Y!A community for two main reasons: many of the Q&A communities such as Brainly and Quora require registration in order to post questions or answers. This means that their knowledge sharing is open only to registered members, rather than the public at large. This is not the case with the Y!A community, whose searchable archive is open for members and non-members alike, and everyone may harvest and reproduce the knowledge accumulated there as their own (Lazar & Litvak Hirsch, 2015).

The second reason is that unlike the majority of Q&A communities, Y!A community distinguishes askers and answerers according to their geographic location. Thus, while in other Q&A communities, an asker from one country cannot be sure if his/her question was answered by his/her countryman, Y!A members can direct their questions to American, Canadian, Australian, Indian and so forth forums, which are likely to reflect the social, political and cultural ambience as it resonates a certain phenomena or aspect of social life.

Search of the Yahoo! Answers (Y!A) Q&A online community archive reveals that members of this community are constantly requested by students to assist them with their civic education assignments. The current study explores the online exchanges among Y!A community members in response to American students' request for help with defining what constitutes the 'good citizen'.

### *2.1 Method*

The Y!A online community offers its members multiple forums to consult other members, in which each member can ask questions and/or answer other members' questions. Each forum is generally dedicated to a different topic, but members may and do ask questions on various topics, not necessarily in the forum's specific topic. For example, one can find questions about religion in a forum dedicated to metal music, etc. Therefore, we looked into questions regarding the issue of the good citizen in different forums, as answered by American members of the Y!A community. The default search of Y!A directs the user of the site to American forums, while in order to inspect what Y!A members of other nationalities discuss requires the use of the 'International' function which offers a search of platforms operated in countries such as Canada, Taiwan, Italy, and France, to name only a few. A search of the Y!A archive reveals the same question regarding the issue of the good citizen, formulated in different words, such as 'What could be considered a good citizen?', 'How do you define who is a good citizen?', and 'What are the characteristics of a good citizen?'. For the current analysis, only queries which received at least four answers were included. Y!A members' answers were analyzed based on Mayring's (2000) method of qualitative content analysis. Mayring suggests that this method provides researchers with opportunity to quantify reappearing codes and themes in interviews or open-ended questions, while maintaining the qualitative approach of developing the to-be-applied categories from the collected data. Each researcher individually analyzed Y!A members' answers, and identified the main definition(s) and/or argument(s) discussed in each

regarding the good citizen. Then, the researchers compared their analysis. The themes agreed by all researches are presented in the following.

### 3. Results

Thirty-one askers posted questions concerning the good citizen on the following Y!A forums: Civic participation (n = 8), senior citizens (n = 6), sociology, immigration, homework help (n = 3 in each), embassies and consulates (n = 2), law and ethics, government, religion and spirituality, books and authors, family, and polls and surveys (n = 1 in each). Each question was answered by 4 to 23 Y!A answerers (M = 6.71, SD = 3.72). A total of 210 unique Y!A members responded to the questions in our sample in the following years: 2006 (n = 8), 2007 (n = 2), 2008 (n = 4), 2009 (n = 3), 2010 (n = 4), 2011 (n = 6), 2012 (n = 3), and 2013 (n = 1).

Table 1 presents the distribution (in percentages) of the features of the good citizen as defined by Y!A members in response to students' questions.

Table 1. Characteristics of the good citizen as defined by Y!A members

Characteristic	% of answerers (n=210)
Obeys the law	35.1
Constructive member of the community	23.6
Votes	20.2
Respects the rights of others	13
Pays taxes	13
Is a good neighbor	12.5
Is kind and polite to others	10.1
Patriotic	10.1
Familiar with the constitution	9.6
Hardworking	7.7
Asks not what his/her country can do for him/her	6.3
Helps others	5.3
Devoted and caring Christian	4.8
Is honest	4.8
Votes wisely	4.3
Politically aware	4.3
Doesn't raise questions about your government	3.8
Pays bills and/or insurance premiums	3.8
Doesn't litter	3.4
Acquires education to get jobs which will fully support him/her	3.4
Cares for the environment	3.4
Raises children to be law-abiding and productive members of society	3.4
Cares for the family	2.9
Stands up for what he/she believe in	2.9
Sets up a website concerning the good citizenship	2.9
Serves on a jury	2.4
Responsible for one's actions	1.9
Has time for friends	1.9
Has time for leisure activities	1.9
Stays out of other people's business.	1.9
Careful driver	1.9
Cares for animals	1.4
No such thing	1.4
Came here legally	1.4
Not a socialist or a liberal	1.4
Wish we had more model citizens	1.0
An example for others	1.0
Serves in the military	1.0
Other	14.4

Three attributes of the good citizen stand out among Y!A members: obeying the law, being a productive member of the community who gives a hand in time of need and/or performs charity work, and someone who votes (35.1%, 23.6% and 20.2%, of answerers, respectively). Between 10% and 13% of answerers mentioned at least one of the following qualities of the good citizen: Respecting the rights of others, paying taxes, being a good neighbor, being kind and polite to others, patriotic, being familiar with the constitution and the laws of the country to ensure that the government doesn't violate them, and works to fix any flawed laws. Between 4% to approximately 10% of answerers mentioned the good citizen as someone who is hardworking, asks not what the country can do for him/her but what s/he can do for his/her country, helps others, is a devoted and caring Christian, is honest, and is politically aware. Less than 4% of Y!A

responses concerning the good citizen claimed that the good citizen pay his/her bills and insurance premiums, doesn't litter, cares for the environment and for animals, acquires education to get jobs that will fully support him/her, raises children to be law-abiding and productive members of society, cares for family and/or friends, stands up for he/she believe in, serves on a jury, is responsible for one's actions, has time for leisure activities and friends, stays out of other people's business, is a careful driver, is a legal citizen, serves in the military, is an example for others, stated that there are not enough good citizens or provided a link to websites that include examples of student papers on this topic. Some of the answerers in this group used cynicism, such as stating that the good citizen does not express any criticism of the government as s/he is a mere robot, that there is no such thing as a good citizen, or that those identifying themselves as socialists or liberals are not good citizens, so only Republicans should be considered to be good citizens. In the 'Other' category (14%, final row, Table 1), we included highly idiosyncratic responses that fall outside any of the previous mentioned themes, such as does not commit treason, has a 45 Magnum that should keep perps from breaking into the local houses, and comes forward when he/she witnesses a criminal act. Table 2 presents our analysis of the characteristics posted by the Y!A members, according to Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) categories of the good citizen's image, which are also additionally labeled by degree of passivity: Passive, Mostly Passive, and Active. This analysis shows that the common notion of the good citizen, expressed by Y!A responding members, aligns with the first and second image defined by Westheimer and Kahne (2004): the personally responsible and the participatory citizen. Moreover, the vast majority of responses comply with the narrowest image of the personally responsible citizen, highlighting passive personal character traits (see table 2), and reflecting conformity to the norms of society. The third image, of the justice-oriented or the active citizen, is mentioned by a very small minority, who mentioned political awareness (4.3%), and standing up for what he/she believes in (2.9%). The results also indicate a fragmentation of society, as the image of the good citizen is centered mostly on needs and interests of the individual and his/her community. As shown in table 3, traits connected to personal or own community interest were mentioned almost twice as frequently as elements of good citizenship involving the nation as a whole.

Table 2. Distribution of the traits of the good citizenship traits mentioned by Y!A members as reflecting Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) images and by passivity/activity

<b>Personally Responsible</b> <i>Passive</i>	%	<b>Participatory</b> <i>Mostly Passive</i>	%	<b>Justice oriented</b> <i>Active</i>	%	Other	%
	149.1		61.6		7.2		
Obeys the law	35.1	Constructive member of the community	23.6	Politically aware	4.3	Devoted and caring Christian	4.8
Respects the rights of others	13	Patriotic	10.1	Stands up for beliefs	2.9	Has time for friends	1.9
Votes	20.2	Votes wisely	4.3			Has time for leisure activity	1.9
Pays taxes	13	Is familiar with the constitution	9.6				
Is a good neighbor	12.5	Helps others	5.3				
Is kind and polite to others	10.1	Cares for the environment	3.4				
Asks not what her/his country can do for her/him	6.3	Sets up website for good citizen	2.9				
Pays bills and insurance	3.8	Serves on a jury	2.4				
Is honest	4.8						
Doesn't raise questions about the government	3.8						
Hardworking	7.7						
Doesn't litter	3.4						
Acquires education for jobs that fully supports her/him	3.4						
Raises children to be law-abiding and productive society members	3.4						
Cares for the family	2.9						
Is responsible for one's actions	1.9						
Stays out of other people's business	1.9						
Careful driver	1.9						

Table 3. Features of the good citizen ascribed to own and community interests or civil/cross community interests

Personal and community interests	%	Civil/cross-community interests	%
Obeys the law	35.1	Votes	20.2
Pays taxes	13	Votes wisely	4.3
Is a good neighbor	12.5	Is familiar with the constitution	9.6
Is kind and polite to others	10.1	Respects the rights of others	13
Hardworking	7.7	Patriotic	10.1
Pays bills and insurance	3.8	Politically aware	4.3
Is honest	4.8	Asks not what her/his country can do for her/him	6.3
Acquires education for jobs that fully supports her/him	3.4	Cares for the environment	3.4
Cares for the family	2.9	Sets up website for good citizen	2.9
Is responsible for one's actions	1.9	Serves on jury	2.4
Careful driver	1.9	Stands up for beliefs	2.9
Stays out of other's business	1.9		
Constructive member of the community	23.6		
Helps others	5.3		
Doesn't litter	3.4		
Raises children to be law-abiding and productive society members	3.4		
Total	134.7%		79.4%

Westheimer and Kahne (2004) find this state of affairs worrying, as democracy cannot thrive with public apathy: While the personally responsible citizen is praised by policy makers, program officers, and citizenship educators, the limitation of qualities of this image, to mostly loyalty and compliance with the law, hamper any 'critical reflection and action that many assume are essential in a democratic society' (p. 244). Indeed, it is quite alarming that the good citizen is expected to be passive and conformist, and that being politically informed, not to mention aware, has only marginal importance in Y!A members answers, with standing up for one's beliefs is hardly mentioned as an element of good citizenship (2.9% in this study).

#### 4. Conclusion

The image of the good citizen in the eyes of American high school students has been found to reflect passivity and conformity (Conover & Searing, 2000; Doppen et al. 2014; Feinberg & Doppen, 2010; Martin & Chiodo, 2007; Sherrod, 2003). These worrying results motivated scholars to look into the sources of this conception, such as educational programs (Westheimer & Kahane, 2004), and citizenship conceptions among pre-service teachers (Martin, 2012; O'Brien & Smith, 2011). In the same line of research, scholars asserted the need to investigate the role of online platforms as arenas of informal civic education and noted that little is known of it (Bennett et al., 2009). The current study took up the gauntlet by considering the inputs of members of an online Q&A community in response to questions on the definition of the good citizen, posted by students seeking assistance with their homework, thus adding to the understanding of the sources of this passive and conformist image of the good citizen. The importance of this study is embedded in the growing presence of the Internet in every sphere of life, and the rising use of online resources as supplemental platforms of learning used by high school students.

The findings show that the conception of the good citizen in the Y!A community, as reflected in its members' responses, is similar to that found among American high school students (Doppen et al. 2014; Feinberg & Doppen, 2010; Martin & Chiodo, 2007) and among pre-service teachers (Martin 2012; O'Brien & Smith, 2011).

The similarity of the results of the current study to those of Westheimer and Kahne (2004) concerning the dominance of the personally responsible and the participatory citizen, is also indicative of the resemblance between the image of the good citizenship in educational programs and in the minds of common Americans, as reflected in the responses by Y!A members. A feedback loop appears to exist between offline and online platforms, conveying a single perception of the good citizen, which echoes a center-right perspective, and settles for a limited interpretation of moral values and social responsibility (Miller, 1995). Naturally, this study cannot (and was not intended to) show causality, but bearing in mind the decades-long dominance of neo-liberal thought in the US, it should not come as a surprise that many Americans imagine good citizens as being self-focused, self-reliant individuals who raise their children to be like them: law-abiding, economically productive community members, who 'stay out of other people's business.' This image corresponds with neoliberal idea of the self-reliant (and self-centered) law-abiding individual (Moore, 2015). Findings of the current study also show that these characteristics of the good citizen are frequently combined with conservative

values, such as caring for one's family or being a good Christian. This combination is compatible with the strange mixture of neoliberal and conservative views widespread in US politics (Harvey, 2005).

The main contribution of this study lies in its emphasis on Q&A communities' role as an additional informal resource for civic education, which imparts conceptions that may be widely common, yet are not what educators want their students to adopt (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Future studies might benefit from looking into how the conceptions of the good citizen are discussed in other socio-cultural settings by members of this and as other Q&A communities. Since the figure of the good citizen is constructed by political and academic observers alike, and is subject of political struggle (Pykett et al., 2010), future studies may benefit from comparing the views of the good citizen found in this and in previous studies to those expressed in the next few years, under the Presidency of Donald Trump.

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